BEYOND CORE COMPETENCIES: PRACTITIONER EXPERTISE AS A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF QUALITY

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The focus on youth program quality has been a uniting and advancing force for the field of youth development in recent years. There is now general consensus around the features of quality settings (Yohalem, Granger & Pittman, 2009). Further, we know that quality is largely determined by the practitioners who design and deliver programs for young people (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons & Walker, 2009).

The question becomes what does it take from a systems-level perspective to prepare and develop youth development practitioners to create and sustain quality youth programs? In this paper we argue that current core competency frameworks in youth work are necessary but ultimately insufficient for capturing the practitioner expertise required to achieve quality in practice and programs.

CORE COMPETENCIES

Considerable efforts have been made to guide and standardize practice through the creation of core competencies in an effort to develop and support an effective youth worker workforce (Starr, Yohalem & Gannett, 2009). These efforts follow those in the allied field of early childhood and are seen as a foundational piece of professionalizing the youth development field (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004).

Core competency frameworks have the possibility of contributing to the establishment of a common language around youth work practice and a common ground across systems. Core competency frameworks can also be used to establish credentials in the field and define a clearer career pathway. At a systems-level, core competencies can be used as an organizational framework for training, credentialing, professional registries, and licensing regulations:

- Policy makers can use core competencies to develop and implement policies that will enhance professionalism in the field, and promote a common system of required skills that can be measured across programs, organizations, and higher education institutions;
- Program directors can use core competencies as guides in hiring and promoting staff based on levels of competency achieved by employees; and
- Practitioners can use core competencies to assess their current qualifications and determine areas for additional professional development.

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A core *competency* is a basic skill, knowledge, or attitude in a specific domain. Youth work core competencies articulate what it is that adults working with youth need to know and do in order to deliver high quality programs (Starr, Yohalem & Gannett, 2009). For example, common content areas across

youth work competency frameworks include curriculum, professionalism, connecting with families, health, safety and nutrition, child and adolescent development, cross-cultural competence, guidance, professional development, connecting with communities, and environment (Starr, Yohalem & Gannett, 2009).

Competency frameworks typically have sub-categories, with indicators detailing observable behaviors reflecting that competency seen in one's practice. For example, the common competency content area "connecting with families" might have sub-categories such as engaging, supporting, and communicating with families. The content area of "health, safety and nutrition" regularly includes items concerning CPR and first aid procedures, risk management, such as the number of chaperones required for group outings, and healthy eating habits. These frameworks tend to focus on the operational, the more measurable units of practice.

Many competency models are based on a continuum of levels from preliminary skills to an advanced level based on preparation and varied experience. Many of these competency levels are cumulative and build on each other. For example, Level 1 for safety might include learning about and being aware of safety concerns in the environment and Level 5 (the highest level in many models) might be that the individual conducts self-assessments of the facility for licensing and accreditation purposes.

From Competency to Competence

A major concern with these competency models and frameworks is that they don't instruct how to get to Level 5, what must one do or learn, and what refined judgment might look like at Level 5.

Further, breaking practice down to the most measurable "can lead to a focus on the parts rather than the whole; on the trivial, rather than the significant… the role of overall judgment is sidelined" (Smith, 1996). By whittling down practice to the ability to undertake specific tasks, it becomes largely stripped of its social, moral and intellectual qualities (Smith, 1996).

In other words, the core competency frameworks tend to be inadequate in accounting for the reality and artistry of achieving these constructs in concrete circumstances of daily practice. They risk denying the existence and importance of professional judgment, and progressive problem solving in addressing the complex issues faced in everyday practice that often defy straight-forward technical solutions. There is a tendency to reduce practice to the most measurable, thereby reducing youth work to a technical skill.

WHEREAS COMPETENCIES FOCUS ON PARTICULAR SKILLS OR DISCRETE ATTRIBUTES, COMPETENCE IS A BROAD CAPACITY OR UNDERSTANDING TO ENGAGE IN AN ACTIVITY OR PRACTICE. COMPETENCIES TEND TO BE ABSTRACT AND UNIVERSAL, WHEREAS COMPETENCE IS CONTEXT DEPENDENT.

We want to make a distinction between competencies and *competence*. Whereas competencies focus on particular skills or discrete attributes, competence is a broad capacity or understanding to engage in an activity or practice. Competencies tend to be abstract and universal, while competence is context dependent.

Rauner (2000) refers to the ability to both assess and do the necessary action in one's work with youth as "competence". Competence grows from the process of recognizing one's abilities and applying them meaningfully and completely to the task at hand. "Competence emerges when a person's talent, skills, and resources find useful application in meeting a commensurate challenge, problem, or dilemma" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

To distinguish competence from competencies, we choose to refer to it as "practitioner expertise".

Practitioner Expertise

Practitioner expertise is the ability to integrate and apply knowledge, skills, or judgment in practice. It is more than the demonstration of competencies; it is the ability to orchestrate multiple competencies into a full range of behaviors necessary for effective practice. It is a moral act, a general disposition, context-dependent and developmental. It is complex and reflective. It is the knack for doing youth work skillfully, gracefully; for doing the right thing at the right time. Some use the term "wizards" or "masters". While most of us know it when we see it, as a field we don't have a very reliable way of identifying it, let alone intentionally producing it.

Across domains, creating quality in daily practice requires a distinct type of knowledge: practitioner expertise (Ericsson, Charness, Fetovich & Hoffman, 2006). Practitioner expertise involves abilities to appraise the diverse problems and situations encountered in one's field. It also involves having the strategic skills to respond to these situations in ways that achieve the desired ends – in this case, to facilitate young people's positive development.

Expertise is defined as the characteristics, skills, and knowledge that distinguish experts from novices and less experienced people. A recent study compared the considerations and strategies that expert versus novice youth workers use in appraising and responding to dilemmas of practice (Walker & Larson, submitted). Its findings suggest that experts tend to see more complexities as well as more possibilities when considering their response to a dilemma scenario. Further, their responses tend to be multi-pronged and youth-centered.

In domains where expertise flourishes, effective responses to dilemmas tend to not have limits. In other words, there is always a higher level at which a problem or an issue can be approached: taking more variables into consideration, reaching a higher standard or result, or meeting a larger and more subtle range of requirements. There is a heroic aspect to expertise in that it requires effort over and above what society recognizes or rewards (Beireiter& Scardamalia, 1993).

We know there are differences in practitioners' level of expertise. A question then arises in terms of what kind of professional development opportunities – what activities, strategies and experiences – might best develop practitioner expertise that moves beyond the core competency level?

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Deliberate Practice

Three decades of research on expertise across a wide range of professions shows that expertise is not merely the result of natural ability or sheer years of experience. The research suggests instead that ongoing "deliberate practice" with feedback appears to be the key in developing and maintaining expertise.

Deliberate practice is defined as appropriately challenging tasks that are chose with the goal of improving a particular skill. Practitioners learn when they have ongoing opportunities to engage with the full range of challenging problems associated with their practice and receive authentic feedback (Ericsson, Charness, Fetovich & Hoffman, 2006). Youth workers can be guided to hone their expertise in ways that increase their effective reasoning and problem-solving abilities which, in turn, will improve the quality of their work with young people.

These findings underscore the importance of training youth workers to attend to the complexity of daily practice and to develop capacities to balance diverse and competing considerations while keeping youth at

the center (Larson et al, 2009). To this end, the discussion and analyses of dilemma-based cases can be a useful component of youth work training (Banks & Nohr, 2003). Collective discussion of challenging cases can help trainees develop abilities to think about the complexities of practice and generate responses that promote quality and improve conditions for positive youth development.

Conclusion

Clearly it is important and valuable to become aware of and to articulate the core competencies, skills, and dispositions required for effective youth work practice. It seems reasonable to promote foundational guidelines for what professional development in youth work should involve, or the guidelines that could be used in assessing the qualifications of job candidates. But there are risks and limitations in applying a core competency approach in the professional development of youth workers.

The checklist and competency levels approach risk oversimplifying practice and can undermine the very essence of effective youth work. Limiting the practice to a purely technical one reduces youth workers to suppliers of a service; it risks divorcing technique from calling. Do we want youth workers to have expertise or technical skills and knowledge?

What youth workers do with our young people requires professional judgment and practical wisdom that transcends routine application of established rules and procedures or mechanical skills. As a field, we need professional development that accounts for the complex reality and artistry of everyday youth work practice.

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